

1. Hate speech and / or bullying on social media

Hate speech and / or bullying on social media – aimed at elected representatives – members of parliament or local councilors - has not been prominent in the debate

Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Iceland (Eva Marin Hlynisdóttir) – informed the Ministry that her student is researching this subject in his final thesis (BA thesis), which will be published in the spring of 2020.

According to information from the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities, this issue has not been prominent - but there is an awareness of the debate in the Nordic countries and it has been discussed in regards with work on democratic reform and increased consultation with residents at the municipal level.

2. Trust in Government, public service and politicians.

Discussion of the lack of trust in politicians and government agencies, the cabinet, Althingi, and particularly members of parliament, has been prominent in public debate since the financial crisis in 2008. Before the crisis, public confidence in the country's political and financial institutions had been considerably more than in most Western countries and corruption perception low. After the crisis, public and financial institutions have regained trust very slowly.

There are two indicators that trust has not fully been regained: firstly, the consistently low ratings of financial institutions and the Parliament in trust surveys, and secondly, the high levels of corruption perception, according to surveys, which suggest that up to 70% of Icelanders believe politicians and public officials to be corrupt and corruption of public institutions to be a serious problem. A poll conducted in February 2019 showed that only 18% of those who participated in the poll, trust the Icelandic parliament and only 16% trust the Reykjavik City Council. However, distrust in some central institutions does not reflect the general atmosphere of trust between citizens.

For the past years, the government has been looking find ways to increase public trust in government and public service.

GRECO called for measures to combat corruption in the Icelandic government, and the government was given until September 2019 to report on what action had been taken by that time. The Icelandic government submitted a status report in the beginning of 2019. GRECO had proposed ten measures for improvements and, based on the status report, six of them had been implemented. Four of the actions have been carried out in part and the Icelandic government has been given time until June 2020 to fully implement them.

One of the first actions made by the current cabinet of Katrín Jakobsdóttir, was to appoint a working group on trust in government and public service. The working group was asked to look at measures that the government could take to change rules, regulations and practices in ways that were likely to increase public trust in government and public service. Ethical codes were given a certain priority. The group was asked specifically to look at the experience of using codes of ethics in public service, and make proposals about revision of existing codes and the creation of new ones. The task was also to consider in general how the issue of trust could be addressed by the government and how it might systematically work to increase trust and to identify areas where rules or new legislation might help in that regard.

The working group submitted a report with proposals for reform in September 2018. The group identified seven areas where improvements could be made, and created all in all 25 separate proposals. Some of them require law amendments, others require the government to create specific regulations, but most of them concern actions that require nothing but the will to act and to prioritize accordingly.

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About Trust and Democracy in Icelandic Society.
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- Ethical codes needed to be updated, and in some cases new codes need to be created for groups within the public administration. Concurrently, the role and purpose of such codes should be made clearer. Codes of ethics should address issues that have primarily to do with working culture and individual responsibility and accountability. They should not be designed to establish additional punitive measures for individuals found to violate them, but rather as guidelines to help understand requirements and limits in daily practice. That said some practices would clearly need to be outlawed by establishing proper rules and procedures, but these need not be a part of the ethical code, but should rather be made and enforced separately.
- The government should increase public access to information and seek to change the common attitude within the public administration, that access to information needed to be explained. Rather, the lack of access to information should need explanation. The group also pointed out that information policies of the government seemed inconsistent and too little awareness of the importance of informing the public in a timely and objective manners about policies and policy change.
- The group made concrete proposals on several issues: Increased demands on ministers and members of parliament to be fully open about financial issues that could conflict with public duties. Current registration requirements of personal finances, assets, debts etc. were inadequate. It was proposed that the government should make sure that the work of lobbyists is fully regulated and that lobbyists should be required to register as such. Rules should be made clear regarding revolving door issues. A law on the protection of whistleblower is also long overdue in Iceland.
- Public consultation and public engagement is a growing and important part of contemporary politics. The group made several suggestions in this regard, recommending some systemic ways of increasing participation and public engagement around policy-making.
- Finally, it was emphasized that the public service should adopt more systematic and thorough training programs and make sure that open and critical discussion was not only allowed but welcomed and encouraged within political and governmental structures.

The working group proposed that an outside body would be involved in following up on the proposals made in the report. It was proposed that the government would make a cooperation agreement with the Institute of Ethics at the University of Iceland which would then serve as a consultant on ethical issues and as a critical watchdog on the Icelandic government. Later an ethics office might be established within the Prime Minister's office, but to begin with, cooperation with the Institute of Ethics, which in fact has in the past sometimes had the role of advising the government, even if informally, would likely be more effective.